

Thinking About Thera: A Re-interpretation of the Wall Paintings in Xeste 3

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The Bronze Age town of Akrotiri contains some of the best-preserved and much discussed frescoes from the Aegean Bronze Age. The wall paintings from Xeste 3 in particular, serve as the foundation for many discussions regarding ritual practice in the Bronze Age; but the identities and the actions portrayed in these paintings are ambiguous at best. This paper will critically analyse the painted figures, their identities, positions and stories while also placing them in the larger context of Xeste 3 and of Akrotiri. The discussion will query the role that these paintings played in constructing and exhibiting Theran culture.

Akrotiri contains some of the best-preserved frescoes from the Aegean Bronze Age, scenes which offer valuable insight into Thera's Bronze Age cultural practices. Acclaimed as the Bronze Age Pompeii, the town of Akrotiri was covered by volcanic debris following the eruption of the Thera volcano c. 1500 B.C.E.,¹ preserving many of the buildings and their delicate wall paintings. This paper will address the subject matter of some of the wall paintings from the building Xeste 3, providing potential new interpretations. Located in the extreme south of the excavated town, Xeste 3 is the second largest building excavated at the site of Akrotiri,² has the highest concentration of wall paintings in the town,³ and is the only house with a so-called lustral basin or *adyton*. This architectural feature consists of a sunken area accessible by steps. The terminology has problematic implications: 'lustral basin' with Arthur Evans' colonial assumptions, and the *adyton* with Classical temple architecture. This paper will address the architectural feature as an *adyton*, although this is not a perfect analogy. The *adyton* along with its associated wall paintings has caused much controversy in Bronze Age scholarship.

The wall paintings in Room 3a, located above the *adyton* of Xeste 3, depict women performing various tasks in a saffron-studded landscape. The 'Adorants', 'Saffron Gatherers', and 'Mistress of the Animals' occupy the northern and eastern walls of the room, on both the ground floor and the first floor (fig. 1). Scholarly interpretations of the *adyton* paintings are surprisingly unified; there is almost unanimous agreement they are evidence for the basin being a site of female initiation rites.⁴ However, I find this explanation lacking both in evidence and coherence. This paper considers the role that the *adyton* frescoes may have played in Xeste 3. It does not intend to provide definitive conclusions about Thera's religion or society but rather to address the possible identification of the female figures as decorative features in a room rather than as symbolic objects.⁵

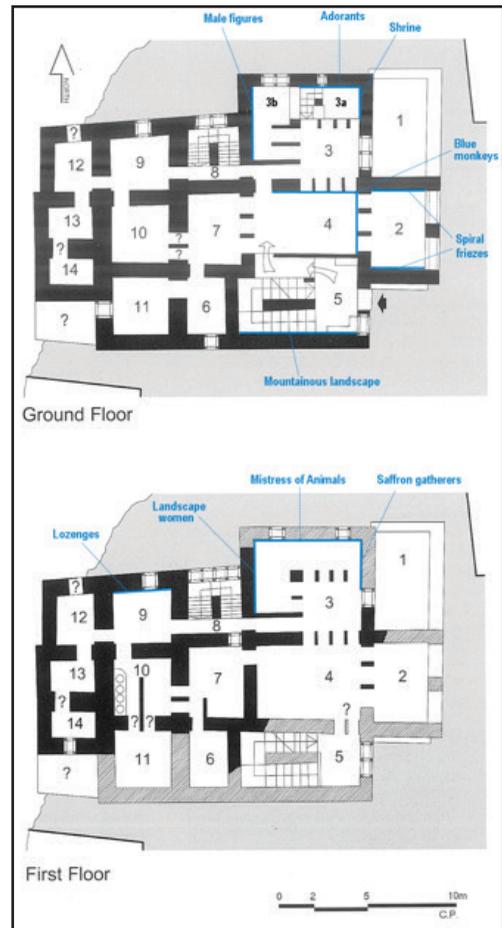


Figure 1: Ground floor and first floor plans of Xeste 3. Position of frescoes and decoration are indicated in blue. Adapted from Palyvou 2005, fig. 62.

The *adyton* in Xeste 3 was located under a series of controversial wall paintings in Room 3a measuring 3.3 x 1.8m and is approached by six steps. The basin in Akrotiri is unusual because of its position; Xeste 3 is not a palace complex, and in fact, no palace complex has been excavated at the site. In both art and architecture there is clear Minoan and Cycladic influence, but it is unclear where Thera lay politically and religiously.⁶ If Akrotiri was not a Minoan town we should not assume that the function of the *adyton*, ritual or otherwise, was the same as an *adyton* on Crete.⁷

The placement and iconography of the paintings above the *adyton* are the primary factors which allow for a religious and ritualistic interpretation. However, considering the ambiguous nature of the architectural feature itself, it is inappropriate to use the room as evidence for the interpretation of the scene as depicting a ritual. Additionally the frescoes cannot be used to prove a ritual nature of the *adyton*. The size, detail, and positioning of the *adyton* paintings within the house as a whole implies their importance, and the attributes of each woman indicates specific identities or activities recognisable to the Therans. Like wall paintings from Roman Pompeii and Herculaneum, it is possible that many of the Akrotiri paintings could depict myths or stories familiar to the occupants of the buildings.

Unlike other buildings in Akrotiri, Xeste 3 has paintings on both the ground floor and the first floor (fig. 2).⁸ The high density and distribution of paintings on both floors in Xeste 3 are indicative of affluence and indicates that Xeste 3 may have functioned as a civic building. The lack of domestic pottery and other items found in Xeste 3 further supports this notion.⁹ Large rooms in the eastern area could have functioned as large reception areas, although the lack of furniture and artefacts severely

limits solid interpretations of function. Furthermore, access to Xeste 3 was restricted; the main entrance is on the southeast corner with a staircase directly ahead. A foyer, Room 5, was created by partitions immediately to the right.¹⁰ In order to arrive in Room 4, the central room, a visitor was first forced to pass through the foyer and down a short corridor, limiting access. To the north, east and west of Room 4, other rooms were accessible through a series of pier and door partitions, which may have been opened or closed to control air and light and may have further regulated access within the building. The layout of the upper story of Xeste 3 reflects the lower story almost identically, demonstrating further access restrictions to the upper level.

Ground Floor *Adyton* Paintings

Traditionally, the paintings on both levels from Room 3a, have been interpreted as representing an initiation sequence; but this interpretation does not adequately consider the relationship between architecture and decoration. After a brief analysis of both the paintings, their positioning within Xeste 3, and a consideration of previous interpretations of their purpose, this paper will draw potential conclusions as to the identification of the figures.

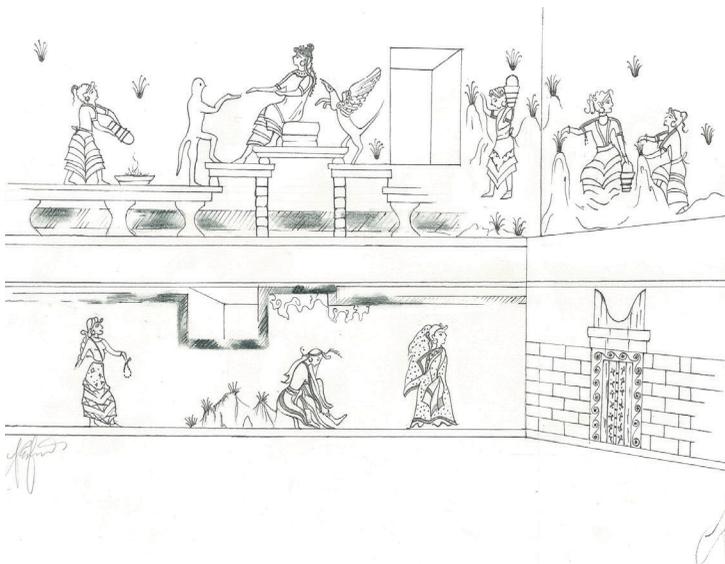


Figure 2: Sketch of the ground floor and first floor frescoes on the north and east walls of Room 3a, Xeste 3. Artist's impression, Fenella Fenton 2014.



Figure 3: 'Adorants' fresco from the north wall on the ground floor of Room 3a. From left, the 'Necklace Swinger', the 'Wounded Woman', and the 'Veiled Girl'. Ht. 1.43m, L. 3.91m. Dumas 1992, fig. 100.

On the north wall of the ground floor Room 3a, three female figures, the 'Adorants', are painted in a rocky landscape with a number of saffron crocuses (fig. 3). Based on hairstyle variations and physiological differences, they represent two age groups.¹¹ On the left of the composition are two older women, the 'Necklace Swinger', and the 'Wounded Woman', with a younger 'Veiled Girl' to the right. On the eastern wall of the *adyton*, there is a painted shrine or altar. The structure is topped with Horns of Consecration, which, according to Nanno Marinatos and Christos Dumas appear to be dripping blood.¹² Paul Rehak disputes this and instead claims that it depicts ashlar masonry and thus represents a palace.¹³ In his argument he also follows Gesell's hypothesis that the 'blood' streaked on the horns is actually garlands of saffron stigmas, a more appropriate interpretation given the setting,¹⁴ as saffron would stylistically and thematically link the paintings.

Of the two older women, the 'Necklace Swinger' is on the far left and is moving toward the basin and the shrine on the eastern wall. She is holding out what appears to be a beaded rock crystal necklace in a gesture which could be one of offering.¹⁵ Her obvious movement from one place to another creates the impression of purpose, of a narrative. N. Marinatos claims that she is an "abbreviated procession" offering the necklace to the shrine.¹⁶ However it is more likely that she was painted to stand alone. Her ornate dress,

comprised of the typical Minoan skirt; a transparent blue, open bodice blouse; and jewelery of chain-like crocus flowers across her chest,¹⁷ may have been indicative of her participation in a particular ritual. However, conventionally, elaborate costume is a means by which artists convey wealth or aristocracy.¹⁸ Given the common depiction of similar dresses elsewhere in Aegean art, it is likely that the style is indicative of a hierarchy based on wealth, although this does not discount N. Marinatos' offering theory. The purpose of her movement is related to the necklace. It is unlikely that the necklace was symbolic of all possible offerings, just as it is difficult to imagine that the women depicted here were generic females. It is more probable that the 'Necklace Swinger' was recognisable to the users of the room. Her purpose in holding the necklace may have been an identifiable attribute, a key which viewers used to read the painted narrative.

The 'Wounded Woman', the central figure, is seated on a rocky outcrop, seemingly tending to her injured foot and is much larger than the other two figures (fig. 3).¹⁹ The purposeful depiction of the injury signifies its importance. N. Marinatos makes the argument that the 'Wounded Woman' is evidence for a rite of passage having occurred within these rooms. She references Van Gennep's theory that pain must be part of the rite, and that the rite included collecting saffron barefoot.²⁰ Rehak notes that next to her injured foot is an unattached saffron crocus and suggests that the

'Wounded Woman' may in fact be reaching for the flower.²¹ Her hand is raised to her head in a gesture commonly associated with mourning or pain, leading scholars to associate the blood-streaked foot with menstruation.²² However, it seems unlikely that a bloody foot would be so symbolic, particularly, as Chapin notes, since the 'Wounded Woman' has a large breast and long hair; both post-pubescent features, making it unlikely that the woman represents a figure about to embark on a puberty rite.²³ Instead, Chapin and Davis believe that the mark represents the blood of defloration.²⁴ Chapin claims that since the woman is depicted as post-menstrual with her full breast, long hair, and 'string skirt', that the blood instead represents her impending marriage,²⁵ and is representative simultaneously of the broken hymen and the blood of childbirth.²⁶

It is, however, tenuous at best to claim that a wounded foot could be representative of any part of being a woman. It is necessary to note here that the so-called blotch of blood on her foot is very small and faded. This leads me to question whether the wound itself was important or whether it had another function. I argue that her pose and injury are attributes which identified her in Theran myth; that she was a well-known figure identifiable through her injury. As a large central figure, the 'Wounded Woman' would be an important character, perhaps the main figure in a mythical narrative. The 'Necklace Swinger' is walking towards her, but she is unaware; if the painting is depicting a narrative then their interaction must not come until later in the story.

The 'Veiled Girl' is in a strange position. Her body faces left as if walking away from the structure on the eastern wall but her head is turned 180 degrees to look back at it. She is almost completely covered by a veil that is pulled back to show her head and arm. Her costume is unlike those of the other two females; she wears a short juvenile skirt and a unique yellow and red veil. The blue head and flat chest identify her as a child, but the veil is unique in Cycladic and Minoan art.²⁷ Rehak

identifies the three 'Adorants' as acolytes in the service of a goddess.²⁸ He suggests that the older two females may have completed their service to the goddess and that the 'Veiled Girl' may only be starting, explaining her garments. He and N. Marinatos claim that the veil separates the girl from the other females and from the rest of the room, symbolically separating her, and identifying her as occupying a transitional role, a liminal space as part of a rite of passage.²⁹ It would be easy to imagine her playing some specific role that required a specific costume. However, the assumption that she *must* be occupied with a rite of passage is unreasonable due to insubstantial evidence. Much like the other 'Adorants', her unique veil may have been an identifiable attribute of a mythical figure.

First Floor *Adyton* Paintings

The upper level paintings are commonly read as a narrative from right to left,³⁰ showing a series of actions from the collection of saffron to the presentation of the same saffron to the central figure seated on the tripartite structure (fig. 4).³¹ One might expect to read the paintings left to right as in the ground floor paintings, yet such a reading is unsupported by the paintings themselves. The inconsistency of directionality in the paintings makes their reading ambiguous and not at all certain. The central female figure was originally assumed by S. Marinatos to be a nature goddess based on her animal attendants and animal themed jewelry.³² His interpretation of the scene has greatly influenced subsequent scholarship on these paintings and many scholars use this interpretation to see a ritualistic scene and purpose. However, the goddess figure is ambiguous and it is easy to attribute religious meaning to unknown figures rather than put them in a wider social context. Furthermore, while religion played an important part in society and social structure, without intimate knowledge about what constituted the pure and profane it is almost impossible to distinguish the extent of a religious ritual within a social ritual.³³



Figure 4: The 'Mistress of the Animals' fresco from the north wall of the first floor of Room 3a. Doulas 1992, fig. 122.

The 'Mistress of the Animals' dominates the first floor fresco; she is flanked by a blue monkey and a griffin, and those in turn are flanked by adolescent girls (fig. 3). The 'Mistress of the Animals' occupies the central position and towers over the other figures. Both S. and N. Marinatos have heavily influenced how this figure has been interpreted as a divinity,³⁴ based on her size, elaborate garments, and attendant animals. The size and central position of the 'Mistress of the Animals' illustrates her status, but this status may be social rather than religious. Her attendant animals are in heraldic positions. The griffin could be evidence of divinity due to its mythical nature, but since both throne rooms at Knossos and Pylos are decorated with griffins,³⁵ it is only indicative that the griffin was connected with authority.³⁶ Its presence, coupled with her size can only suggest that the 'Mistress of the Animals' held a high social status. Our ignorance of whether the animal was considered sacred restricts any religious interpretations. Therefore the only valid statement describing the 'Mistress of the Animals' painting is that it represents a higher authority, perhaps it is a form of ruler iconography, or possibly even a deity.

Through their analyses, Rehak and Chapin brought attention to an important detail, fine blue lines found in the eyes of the women discussed above. This detail would have passed by unnoticed were it not for the red lines in the eyes of the men in the ground floor adjacent Room 3b, and in the eyes of the women from the House of Ladies, also in the town of Akrotiri. The older 'Landscape Woman' in Room 3b on the first floor of Xeste 3 has no lines at all in her eyes.³⁷ Rehak claims that the blue streaks are the physical representation of a diet rich in Vitamins A and B, the same vitamin found in saffron.³⁸ The men and women painted with red streaks in their eyes may indicate a Vitamin A and B deficient diet. Rehak therefore claims that the frescoes in Xeste 3 distinguish between people who have access to saffron and those who did not; a differentiation which seems to have followed gender, age, and hierarchical lines.³⁹ Additionally, the colored streaks in the figures' eyes may equally have been artistic conventions specific to different painters. Different painters may have worked in specialised areas thus restricting their particular depictions to a room, as evident in both the ground floor and first floor Room 3a paintings.

Interpretations of these frescoes are problematic as it is unclear whether they depict everyday activities such as the harvest of saffron, or are representative of something else entirely. The depiction of saffron is common to both frescoes and could thematically link both registers,⁴⁰ though the importance of the plant could easily justify its feature in these paintings. Ferrence and Bendersky argue that Xeste 3 functioned as a centre for female physicians or priestesses who worked with saffron.⁴¹ Saffron has many medicinal properties, and functions as an emmenagogue, promoting uterine health and in high doses may have been used as an abortifacient.⁴² Based on these features, they argue that the ‘Mistress of the Animals’ was a healing deity. The validity of their conclusions is based on the assumption that the ancient Therans were aware of the medicinal properties of saffron. From the colors used in the paintings and the garments worn by the women in the paintings, the use of the plant as a dye was certainly known. Additionally, it is possible that the Therans knew some of its medicinal properties, perhaps communicated through the abundance of saffron in these paintings. The use of the plants in the frescoes of Xeste 3, lends support to the idea that saffron played an important role in the civic and perhaps religious functions of Xeste 3. It is entirely possible that the upper story paintings depict a realistic situation where saffron is harvested and offered to an authority who may redistribute it or sell it, or a deity who employs its healing abilities. The ground floor paintings also depict saffron crocuses albeit in smaller numbers. In this context it may have been depicted as a realistic portrayal of the Thera landscape or used in order to link the narrative depicted to the usage of saffron in the house.

The connection between the two stories and paintings are thematic, not physical. Originally a floor existed between the two levels and as discussed above, access was restricted between the two areas. Movement between them would have involved passing through a variety of rooms and a staircase, effectively minimising direct relations between the two scenes. This

is an often overlooked fact, with Forsyth even suggesting that the ‘Wounded Woman’ may have ‘ascended’ to join the ‘Mistress’ after an initiation.⁴³ If initiations did occur in the *adyton*, the ‘Mistress’ would not have been visible, and would have no visual influence on the scene. Additionally, given her presence on the first floor, the ‘Mistress’ is in no way physically connected with the *adyton* invalidating any argument that her presence is a sign that ritual activity occurred there. One could argue that perhaps this civic building was not used for initiation rites into womanhood but rather was used by the group of women identified by Ferrence and Bendersky, possibly priestesses, who employed saffron medicinally. The use of saffron and initiations are not mutually exclusive, but there is no evidence in the wall paintings that these were the primary functions that occurred in Room 3a, let alone the wider Xeste 3.

Early in the 1974 excavations Doumas discussed the possibility that Xeste 3 was the house of a wealthy saffron merchant.⁴⁴ The clumps of saffron painted may suggest purposeful cultivation,⁴⁵ and the ‘Saffron Gatherers’ may represent workers, dressed elaborately as a symbol of his wealth (fig. 5). Saffron is an expensive commodity, especially when one considers its uses in medicine.⁴⁶ However, the lack of domestic pottery and furniture prevents any clear interpretation of Xeste 3 as the house of a wealthy family. Given the building’s size, fine quality, and position within the town, the function of Xeste 3 as a civic building is highly probable. Therefore the wall paintings within, while decorative, likely depicted recognisable figures who were important to the town, local heroines or characters from a known myth.

The Traditional Theory

The traditional theory that the Xeste 3 paintings depict a rite of passage for girls is flawed. It is important that the ambiguous nature of the paintings is clearly communicated. Socially, the rites of passage that children undergo to pass into adulthood are public events.⁴⁷ In

many cultures they are the established means by which children are accepted into society and introduced to roles that they will play in maintaining the culture, religion and the social structure. Xeste 3, decorated with a greater number of wall paintings than any other building at Akrotiri, has the only example of an *adyton* and has multiple examples of pier and door partitions. These features make it probable that Xeste 3 functioned as a civic building, the role of which is unlikely to have been solely that of a place of initiation.

The problem in identifying these images as depicting part of an initiation ritual lies in our lack of knowledge about Theraan ritual practice. Literature about initiation sequences is based on ethnographies from tribal-scale groups.⁴⁸ Akrotiri as a built town does not fall within this definition. Van Genneep famously introduced the idea of a three-phase initiation sequence which may be applied to any important transition in life.⁴⁹ It may, therefore, be possible to apply the sequence here.

However there is no overt distinction between phases in these paintings. The shorn hair is indicative of childhood, but the depiction of breasts is a physical bodily change associated with physical puberty rather than the social puberty that Van Genneep claims is the focus of initiations.⁵⁰ Perhaps the distinction can be seen in the ‘Veiled Girl’s’ unique clothing; but she is the only example of any figure dressed in such a veil so far excavated in the Aegean. To base an assumption of an initiation rite on the separation of one girl amongst many, remains blatantly speculative.

The exclusive use of females as decoration, and as a basis for an initiation interpretation or engendering process is illusionary. Room 3a, the area discussed, is small and the adjoining room, Room 3b, depicts images exclusively of men, highlighting the fact that these paintings do not exist in isolation but interact with both the architecture and other paintings in the building (fig. 1). Additionally, a room’s decoration does not always reflect its purpose,



Figure 5: ‘Saffron Gatherers’ fresco from the east wall of the first floor of Room 3a Douras 1992, fig. 116.

therefore the decoration of Room 3a very probably does not reflect its function. This makes a narrative or mythical interpretation of the paintings, as separate from the function of the *adyton*, particularly reasonable.

Rehak aligns the actions seen in the Xeste 3 frescoes as one similar to the engendering processes of the cult of Artemis at Brauron in the Classical period.⁵¹ Unfortunately this does not explain the roles of either the 'Wounded Woman', or that of the 'Veiled Girl', nor does it acknowledge other paintings in the building. If the main purpose of Xeste 3 was to provide an area where girls may be inducted into society, how should one interpret the 'Man in the Mountainous Landscape' at the entrance (fig. 1)?⁵²

It is evident that the figures are enacting something. The 'Saffron Gatherers' on the eastern wall of the first floor could be depicting the action of picking saffron accurately (fig. 5), while the 'Adorants' may have been figures from a mythic tradition. The actions are inexplicable by themselves. The lack of similar iconography around the Aegean could be attributed to a specifically Theran myth, perhaps an origin myth, or a depiction of local heroines. Saffron may have played a role in a particular myth or story, thus explaining its presence in the paintings. In this case, these figures would have been recognisable to the Therans, much as later Greeks identified Herakles through depictions of his lion skin. However, since a Theran mythic tradition is unknown at present it is impossible to state with any surety that this is the case, although the idea of the 'Adorants' as characters from a mythic tradition should not be put aside merely for want of more evidence.

Conclusion

The wall paintings in Xeste 3 display a variety of features which may be interpreted in a number of ways, none of which are entirely certain. It is unlikely that the *adyton* paintings depict an initiation sequence, or represent a puberty or

marriage rite, given that this interpretation is based on the tenuous symbolism of a small smear of blood on the 'Wounded Woman's' foot. It is more probable that Xeste 3 was used as a civic building within which saffron may have been used medicinally. This interpretation could explain the waiting area in Room 5, though not necessarily the large spaces of Room 4 and 2. An attractive explanation of the depiction of the 'Adorants' is that they are figures from a mythic tradition, while the first story frescoes could clearly depict the saffron picking process or another myth. Wall paintings do not always reflect the use that rooms were put to, and it is probable that they functioned primarily as decoration rather than as an explanation of a ritual. The 'Mistress of the Animals' can certainly be identified as a higher authority, although not necessarily a goddess. Any activity that occurred in the building may not have been its only feature; be it religious or civic performances, saffron usage, or mythic traditions. None of the above are mutually exclusive, however interpretations of the Xeste 3 wall paintings should focus specifically on observable characteristics and treat the figures as decorative features rather than symbolic.

Endnotes:

- 1 According to Egyptian chronology, the eruption must have occurred between 1560 and 1480 b.C.E., but ice-core dating suggests an earlier date 1650 – 1643 bce. Wiener 2003 in Palyvou, 2011, 248.
- 2 Palyvou 2005, 54; Doumas 1992, 19, 128.
- 3 Palyvou 1986, 179.
- 4 See n. Marinatos 1993, 205; Doumas 1992, 128; Davis 1986.
- 5 Knappett 2002, 158.
- 6 Doumas 1983, 123.
- 7 Palyvou 2005, 183; Marinatos, n. 1984, 73.
- 8 Doumas 1983, 54.
- 9 Marinatos, s. 1976, 23; Doumas 1992, 127.
- 10 Marinatos, s. Thera vii, 1976, 23.
- 11 Rehak 2004, 87.
- 12 Marinatos, n. 1984 74-75; Doumas, 1992, 129 in Rehak, 2004, 87.
- 13 Rehak 2004, 87.
- 14 Gessell in Rehak 2004, 87.
- 15 Doumas 1992, 129.
- 16 Marinatos, n. 1984, 75.
- 17 Rehak 2004, 87.
- 18 Colburn and Heyn, 2008a, 4.
- 19 Rehak 2004, 88.
- 20 Marinatos, n. 1984, 78-84; Van Gennepe 1960. According to Marinatos, walking barefoot in the rocky landscape depicted, would have been painful and within a group of girls provided a sense of achievement and camaraderie necessary for a rite of passage.
- 21 This does not explain the red paint however. Rehak 2004, 89.
- 22 Rehak 2004, 94; Marinatos, n. 1993, 205-211; Colburn 2008b, 35.
- 23 Chapin 2001, 22.
- 24 Chapin 2001, 23; Davis 1986, 420.
- 25 Barber 1991, 257 writes that a string skirt was indicative of sexual availability, or reproductive age, or that the woman had reached puberty but was not yet married.
- 26 Chapin 2001, 20.
- 27 Only other example of a similar type of patterning is a Mycenaean fresco fragment depicting a girl in a yellow tunic with red polka dots. The arrangement of arms and hairstyle is consistent with the 'veiled girl'. Rehak, 2007, 222.
- 28 Rehak 2007, 210-213
- 29 Rehak 2004 93; Marinatos, n. 1984, 79; 1993, 208-209. Traditionally, the whole scene is attributed to a rite of passage through the presence of the horns of consecration on the east wall.
- 30 Doumas 1983, 76; Marinatos, n. 1984, 61.
- 31 Doumas 1983, 76-77.
- 32 Marinatos, s. Thera vii 1976, 33-34.
- 33 Durkheim 2002, 40-46.
- 34 Davis 1986, 402. Marinatos, s. Thera vii, 1976, 22-23.
- 35 Preziosi and Hitchcock 1999, 160.
- 36 Morgan 1988, 50-51.
- 37 Davis 1986, 403-404
- 38 Rehak 2004, 92.
- 39 Rehak 2004, 92.
- 40 Chapin 2008, 72.
- 41 Ferrence and Bendersky 2004, 214-218.
- 42 Ferrence and Bendersky 2004.
- 43 Forsyth 1997, 59.
- 44 Doumas 1983, 76.
- 45 Morgan 1988, 29.
- 46 Ferrence and Bendersky 2004, 203.
- 47 Van Gennepe 1960, 68.
- 48 Van Gennepe 1960; Turner 1969.
- 49 Van Gennepe 1960, 67.
- 50 Though the two may coincide, however rarely. Van Gennepe 1960, 67-68.
- 51 Rehak 2004, 93, 210; 2007, 208- 210, 224.
- 52 He is as of yet not fully reconstructed or published, but Doumas 1992, 128 identifies the figure.

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